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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ANOTHER STEP FORWARD - TALK SHOWS RESUME
IN EARNEST

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) Summary: After a hiatus, Georgian Public Broadcasting channel is now running three political talk shows, Imedi TV has one, and Rustavi TV is planning to launch one as well. Kavkasia remains predominately a platform for opposition voices and newly-licensed Maestro is now producing its own political talk show programming. While editorial policy and news programming remains an issue, access to a broad spectrum of opinion is available to those who seek it. End Summary.

Talk Shows Resume

12. (SBU) Georgian Public Broadcasting now hosts a weekly show, Accents with Eka Kvesitadze, who regularly invites guests from both the opposition and government. Twice weekly, First Theme with Natia Sordia, has resumed giving equal time to both the government and opposition though some observers note the show has tended to lean somewhat to the latter. Newly launched political talk show, Political Week with Inga Grigolia, has also hit the airwaves and includes a roughly 50-50 mix of government and opposition voices. Imedi TV is running a twice weekly talk show which gives equal time to government and opposition. Rustavi-2, while generally considered to be "pro-government" gives opposition figures a platform to express critical opinions in its weekly summaries of political events. Political shows on Tbilisi area channel Kavkasia remains almost exclusively opposition opinion though recently government officials have shown a willingness to appear. Maestro V, which recently obtained a license to broadcast political programming, features the show "Profession of the Journalist" led by opposition-minded Tamar Chikovani as well as more moderate journalists Ia Antadze and Aleko Eliashvili. The format of all the talk shows is host-driven dialogue. Guests with opposing view points do not appear together. Guests are interviewed by the host and given time to express their opinions. The drawback is that, unlike a debate format, the opposing side does not have an immediate chance to challenge statements or dispute factual assertions. Overall, the format seems responsive to an oft heard criticism that opposition voices are not given ample time to express their complete opinions on matters.

Politicians Weigh In

13. (C) Mayor of Tbilisi, Gigi Ugalava explained to the Ambassador that the GOG was going ahead with its plan to launch a channel devoted to public affairs programming, Georgia's answer to C-SPAN. He also informed the Ambassador that Rustavi-2 would start a political talk show next month. Recently a guest himself on "Political Week," Ugalava said he was given very tough questions that he answered directly. A number of embassy staff (all noted they were not supporters of Ugalava) who watched the broadcast agreed, saying Ugalava was impressive and answered every question asked. Following his appearance was former PM Noghaideli -- and current opposition figure -- who drew less than stellar reviews from

our informal panel. On January 18, Minister of Economic Development, Lasha Zhvania, took very difficult questions about Georgia's recent decision to enter into a joint management agreement of the Enguri power station with a Russian owned company, InterRAO UES.

14. (C) Former Imedi journalist, Giorgi Targamadze and leader of the Christian Democratic Movement also gave a positive review of the new talk shows. Targamadze dismisses non-Parliamentary opposition claims that they lack access to televised media as ridiculous. Targamadze said editorial policy is the biggest problem opposition parties face. Targamadze used the example of his former news team at Imedi, saying "we used to have an anti-government editorial policy and the coverage reflected it. Now, with the change in ownership, the exact same team is producing pro-government news coverage." Targamadze told Poloff that he is actively talking to various EU countries about his idea to launch a new channel with its own news division which would take a more "balanced" view of events. On a related note, the Ambassador and Emboffs met January 20th with Sarmite Elerte, one of the founders of Latvia's Diena newspaper, who now serves as the Chairperson of the Baltic to Black Sea Alliance, an international NGO designed to promote regional security and democracy. She is studying ways to help promote media freedom, possibly including the formation of a European monitoring body similar to the one which Polish editor and activist, Adam Michik formed after the reopening of Imedi television in late 2007.

15. (C) Embassy Comment: The recent addition of a number of political talk shows represents a positive step forward for

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Georgia's media climate. Relatively inexpensive to produce, the talk show is a good vehicle to allow for the expression of diverse political opinion in a small and largely unprofitable media market. The reappearance of talk shows should positively affect the development of policy debate. The willingness of GOG officials to go on these shows and be subjected to criticism and tough questions is another encouraging sign. Pro-government editorial news policy remains an issue; however, with the launching of the new talk shows, Georgian TV now allows for more accountability of public officials, pluralism of opinion, and independent coverage. Because the most popular format seems to be host driven, most hosts challenge both opposition and government alike. End Comment.
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